

Our Trip - L. King

And the scribe said, "Take thy pen and write." This will not be a polished essay with structure and footnotes but a rather disconnected account from memory, notes jotted down, and further constricted by one's own 'attending'. Perhaps before getting more involved, it should be stated that this article concerns a trip to Switzerland taken by Mrs. King and me last summer.

We left Hamilton by train, arriving at Montreal in the early morning of June 29. The boat taken was the "Alexander Pushkin", a Russian ship of moderate size - around 576 feet by 178 feet. We left around 11:00 a.m. to the hooting of ships, a brass band and a rather moving chorus of mainly male voices, singing in Ukrainian. The passenger list was a study in language and national origin. Besides English, one could hear Russian, Finnish, Ukrainian and German. There were a number of Americans who flew in or came by train. The Russians are not allowed to dock in American ports.

Among the Canadians were two groups of teenagers from Metro Toronto - and their chaperones, taking a guided tour through various European countries. They were not a true cross-section of Ontario youth - the ordinary papa and mama cannot lay out 1000 dollars plus for a summer in Europe, yet their friendliness and infectious enthusiasm made for a very gay atmosphere. There were also elderly Canadians, as well as mothers and young children going back for visits to England, Germany, Finland and Eastern Europe.

There was a fairly large group of Russians returning to Russia via Leningrad. There was a high ranking Soviet diplomat from the United Nations and his party. The Lithuanian national orchestra, and a baritone soloist, straight from a culture exchange visit in Montreal were also on board.

Unconsciously Canadians, and other Western countries look for evidence of Russian repression, furtive expressions, restraint, low voices, bugged cabins. Perhaps all this may be true, but there was little outward evidence. Perhaps also only the reliable Russian is employed on such a boat - one so indoctrinated that he is immune to any Western contamination. Russians are really emotional - shades of Kruschef - (at least there). They talk loud, are affectionate to their children (to everybody's children), greet their friends boisterously with back-slapping and bear hugs.

A high pressure area of calm weather accompanied the 'Pushkin'. For two days off and east of Newfoundland we were enshrouded in a dense fog. This would cover an area from 800 to 900 miles wide. In calm, sunny weather the ocean's surface is beautiful. The water is painted in ever changing shades of green and blue. Undulating swells, so gentle that the film of the ocean's surface is unbroken travel in ripples as far as one can see. Only, occasionally did white caps break this membrane. The boat itself ploughed a distant highway, showing in lighter colours with silky green breakers right behind the boat. On the eastside of the Atlantic the air itself is soft, warm on the sunny side of the boat.

The boat itself was efficiently managed - Soviet desire to impress? - The crew was out swabbing the decks at daylight. Stewardesses continually serviced cabins; the bathrooms were spotless. The sailors painted part of the metal work during the voyage. At Tilbury, England the crew were cleaning and painting at the waterline. The meals, served by smartly uniformed waitresses and a few waiters were bountiful. The appetizers or hors-d'oeuvres were served buffetstyle in huge platters; there were bowls of sour cream, caviar, relishes, stewed fruits and pickled fish etc. The maincourse was just as varied and one could order almost anything, except a hot dog or a hamburger.

After several days on a boat, one gets the feeling of being caged or cramped. After all there are only several acres of surface in decks, hallways etc. A common sight was to see many people pacing briskly back and forth around the decks. It probably was not to wear off a few calories.

Certain events, such as afternoon teas, the opening of the post office, the evening entertainment suddenly become important. The official did operate a busy round of events. There was a library with books mainly in Russian, English and French, but with a smattering of other languages. The books seemed to be heavily slanted towards the Soviet way of life, or showed western society in a critical way. The national orchestra put on two concerts with strings, soloist and chorus. The Saturday night before docking the crew put on a rousing program of folk dances, songs etc. There was even a singing bartender - a slim fellow with a basso profundo voice. One of the cleaning women - a dark, gypsy-like girl, was an accomplished dancer. There were English news broadcasts several times a day, - canned and direct from Moscow.

(to be concluded next week)